

Taking Care--Documenting the Occupational Culture of Home Care Workers
Archie Green Fellows Project, 2014-2015
(AFC 2014/021: 01540)
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**Joyce Vegar interview, 2015-01-21 : interview conducted by Nathan J. Moore
and Donald Eugene Stacy**

INTERVIEW LOG

00:07:05-00:07:23: Name is Joyce Vegar, but goes by Joy. Lives in Lakeside, Oregon. Has worked as a home care worker for 13 years.

00:07:30-00:08:12: Other jobs—fry cook, certified professional nanny for 15 years, childcare provider. Recruited to home care work by childcare co-worker.

00:08:19-00:09:24: Has worked mainly with seniors, but also with clients in the mental health system. Has done hospice work and worked with clients with Parkinson's, diabetes, and Alzheimer's. Has lived-in with clients.

00:09:30-00:10:22: Has worked exclusively on a one-on-one basis with clients. Sometimes part of a caregiving team, but only one home care worker is there at the same time. When you “live-in,” you work for a certain number of days, and then another worker takes over. Also worked in situations that are not quite “live-in,” but involves shift work. Always kept a notebook and arrived early to speak with other home care workers.

00:10:32-00:11:11: Has been on duty twice when clients passed away. Worked with one client for 20 months. She got to pass away in her bed with Joy, her dog, and her cat in the room, which was what she wanted.

00:11:31-00:13:08: Previous jobs have involved caregiving. Sees herself as a people person. It's important to know that her job makes a difference. People get to stay in their own homes, go places, do things. One client had cancer and could no longer talk. Joy would get her out of apartment and take her for drives. Sometimes did this on her own time without pay.

00:13:20-00:14:37: Can anyone do this work? Yes, but not everyone can do it well. You have to have compassion and like people. You should not be a home care worker if you remain uninvolved and disconnected with clients. Don't have to be bosom buddies with clients, but you have to care for them. You have to be willing to roll up your sleeves and get dirty.

00:14:56-00:16:33: How do you learn the job? There are training programs now, but not when she entered the field. There used to be just a basic orientation. Got lucky with first client — a stroke victim whose wife was a former CNA (certified nursing assistant). Learned a lot of skills from her. Now there are good paid trainings on a variety of subjects that workers can access through the Oregon Home Care Commission. Important to keep learning.

00:16:41-00:17:49: Does get close to clients, some more than others. Has become close to some of the families. Also has been a care giver for members of the same family. Works closely with family members when caring clients with Alzheimer's and dementia.

00:18:03-00:19:55: Emotional relationships with clients can be stressful, especially when someone passes away. Being a Christian helps. Often prays at work when things are going wrong. People with dementia often “lose their filters” and yell at caregivers. Going for a walk in nature helps.

00:19:58-00:20:37: On two separate occasions, the person who was supposed to relieve her did not arrive. Ended up working thirteen straight days with no help. Dealt with it by going outside for small periods of time.

00:20:47-00:23:00: Has been a first responder for people in emergency situations, sometimes in the middle of the night. There are times you work on your days off because there is no one else available. Flexibility is important, but does like to have a general idea of what the client needs. Usually, there's a task list to follow, but it's not always possible to stick to it.

00:23:03-00:25:30: Has a twenty-two-year-old daughter, who was ten when Joy started home care work. When a client broke her hip and locked herself in her house, Joy's daughter climbed through the window and opened the door. She was a hero.

00:26:23-00:28:35: Is there a typical day in home care work? Yes and no. Depends on the task list. Some jobs involve only cleaning, others involve meal prep, activities, etc. Almost always has more than one client at a time. Currently has six clients and carries out a variety of tasks—housekeeping, cleaning, and even takes one client out to dinner.

00:28:41-00:29:40: Likes the variety and being around different people. Works with three different clients on Tuesdays. Very busy.

00:29:48-00:30:32: What do you talk about with clients? Anything and everything. Doesn't talk about her faith unless client is a Christian and brings it up. Talks about families, dogs, interesting things that have happened, news items. You talk like you would talk to a friend.

00:31:34-37:02: Any specific stories that illustrate what being a caregiver is like? Yes. Lived part of the week with a client and shared duties with another less experienced home care provider. Client experienced a medical emergency and the other caregiver called the fire department. Joy arrived, got into bed behind client, put her hands on his shoulders, and told him to breathe. Client calmed down and did not have to be transported. Did what had to be done in that situation. Another client was developing a pressure sore from sitting in a recliner. Went to her house at two in the morning every morning and switched the pillow. Learned a lesson after messing up her own sleep schedule — just because you can do something doesn't mean you should.

00:37:13-00:39:15: Experience helps home care workers know what to look for on the job. Caregivers are always on the look out for things like pressure sores.

00:39:18-00:41:18: Humor is very important. Part of Joy's philosophy — you can laugh or you can cry and laughing is more fun. Sometimes things are genuinely funny. Tells story of cat jumping on her while helping client in the bathroom. Some clients like to laugh more than others.

00:41:24-00:44:23: Currently serves as home care council director for Coos and Curry Counties. Attends meetings at labor hall in Coos County and travels to Gold Beach for Curry County meetings. Very active in the union. Also serves on three committees. Getting together with other union members is really helpful. There aren't other people at the work site, so it's nice to talk about your day, experiences, get advice. Helps you realize that you are not the only one who has experienced things like clients refusing to take medicine or take a bath. It's nice to be in a room where everyone thinks that your job has value.

00:44:38-00:45:53: Caregiver talk—outsiders might not understand acronyms like PSW (personal support workers). Caregivers talk about things that non-caregivers don't normally discuss — anatomy, giving baths, catheter care, etc.

00:46:47-00:48:50: Learns best through hands-on experience. Tells clients that they will have repeat things in the beginning. Also learns by making notes to self. Lots to remember with six clients. Not currently cooking for any clients.

00:48:58-00:50:18: Has the union made a difference in your work? Yes. When first started, there was no workers' compensation. Was always worried about tripping or hurting self. Now has paid time-off and health insurance. Has high blood pressure and allergies and medications are covered. Nice to be able to see the doctor, especially when dealing with women's and age-related health issues.

00:50:20-00:51:20: Has traveled to the Oregon State Capitol (in Salem, Oregon) for lobby days. Doesn't just advocate for self; advocates for clients too. Important to share stories with lawmakers. Remembers a client being asked, "What does your home care worker mean to you?" He responded, "It means I get to keep my feet." He was insulin-dependent and couldn't put on support hose. Home care workers put it on for him. "I defy anyone to hear a story like that and not think that the program needs to be funded."

00:51:21-00:52:15: The SEIU [Service Employees International Union] care provider umbrella includes home care workers, personal support workers, childcare workers, nursing home workers, and workers in adult foster homes. If everyone who receives home care support goes to nursing homes, what will we do with the people who need to be there? We don't have the money and bed space for everyone. It costs taxpayers a lot less to have Joy go in for a few hours a day than it does to put people in 24- our facilities.

00:52:19-00:52:49: Has not testified in a legislative session, but has talked to individual legislators. Will be talking with local legislators at an upcoming town hall meeting.

00:52:53-00:54:14: Some home care workers take clients to lobby days, but Joy's clients don't travel well. Home care workers wear purple union colors on trips. Currently, has a union t-shirt, vest, and jacket. Was in Mexico several years ago and was amused that her cosmetic kit, day-trip bag, and purse all had SEIU logos on them.

00:54:19-00:54:32: At the lobby days, if there is a big gathering, someone will start chanting, SEIU!, SEIU! (with clapping on the beats). Everyone joins in.

00:54:45-00:55:38: All wear purple so legislators will see them. If one person says that something needs to change, politicians will think about it. If a sea of purple shows up and says, "We really think you should fund this program," it's hard to ignore it.

00:56:12-00:56:57: Discussion of various SEIU colors. Don Stacy (videographer) notes that his SEIU union local wears red. Joy: it's important that each sector of the union has an individual identity as well as a collective identity. Discussion between Nathan and Joy about what the term "home care worker" means and how it is often applied to multiple jobs.

00:57:05-00:59:40: How does the community view home care work? Some people are aware of what home care workers do, but a lot are not. One third of Curry County's population is 65 or older. One-quarter to one-fifth of Coos County's population is 65 or older. A lot of people need help or will need it in the future. They are part of the community and should be taken care of. It's part of the covenant we make with workers in the U.S. If you work hard all your life, you should be able to retire and be cared for. If we don't do this, we're letting people down. There are other cultures that revere their elderly and we can learn from them.

00:59:49-01:00:09: Works with male and female clients. It depends mostly on personality.

01:00:14-01:00:35: Hobbies — walking, reading, watching movies and television, going for drives, talking to people. Active in the Hauser Community Church.

01:01:48-01:02:38: Something surprising about home care work? The organizational part. Helping people with memory issues involves booking appointments, taking them to physical therapy, filling the medicine box. People don't know that home care workers “make the whole place run.”

01:02:56-01:04:17: Sometimes has to make necessary changes in a client's life. Tells story of client who threatened another caregiver with a kitchen knife. Joy made the decision to move knives to a safer place. Calls this “living-proofing the environment.”

01:01:32-01:05:32: Plans on doing this work as long as physically able. May transition to more specialized work that doesn't involve as much physical exertion.

01:05:40-01:08:58: Discusses Harris v. Quinn, a court case in Illinois. Any home care worker knows about it. The Supreme Court coined a brand new phrase: fully-fledged state worker. The Court said home care workers are not fully-fledged and entitled to certain benefits. Impacted SEIU in Oregon. Union stopped collecting fair share dues from non-members that still benefited from collective bargaining. Likens it to hooking up to the neighbor's cable. Everyone should help pay. Very offended by the idea that home care workers are not fully-fledged state workers. Considers it a civil rights issue. It will be an ongoing fight and SEIU may not win. Public unions are the last strongholds of unionism in the U.S. Unions don't mean what they used to mean. Union didn't used to be a dirty word. Going to a union meeting wasn't something that you had to do on the sly. Middle class is vanishing so that people at the top can make more money.

01:09:00-01:09:52: Father was a union carpenter, owns his home. Joy lives in a mobile home that's falling apart. Not sure how it can be replaced. We need to take care of the care providers.

01:10:09-01:13:10: Frustrated about not being a fully-fledged state worker. Receives pay voucher from a state office, paycheck says “State of Oregon” on it. Also does the union orientation for Coos and Curry Counties in state buildings. Why suddenly a second-class citizen? Works on SEIU's civil and human rights committee. An African-American committee member reminded Joy that social security originally excluded domestic and agricultural workers. Why? Because they were non-whites. Do we really want to go back to differentiating between the value of workers on the basis of what they do or the color of their skin? Home care workers are one of the most diverse work populations because people who need care come in all shapes, colors, and sizes.

01:14:40-01:16:42: Question from Don Stacy: How do you feel about the recent push for \$15/hour in industries like fast food? How do you feel about home care administrators who say that they can't pay workers that amount? Joy supports anyone who can get \$15/hour because a rising tide floats all boats. The heads of corporations need to re-examine what the phrase "can afford" means. Discusses the difference between heads of corporations affording luxury vacations and workers making choices between food and medication. Talks about being a single mother and trying to make ends meet.

01:16:52-01:17:02: Notes that many home care workers keep working past retirement age. Knows home care workers in their seventies or older because they can't afford to retire.

01:18:11-01:21:30: Example of the importance of home care work. Imagine being in a Wal-Mart or walking down the street. Think about everyone you see who is over 65 and imagine all of them not being there anymore. They are our bridges to the past. We need to respect that. Discusses her father and all of the buildings that he helped build. He deserves to be taken care of in his old age. Also talks about mother's struggles with dementia and not being able to have a home care worker.

01:22:47-01:24:26: Talks about how home care workers can contribute to decision making on health care policies and senior programs. Home care workers have experience and common sense. Gives example based on former client's experiences.

01:26:39-01:29:00: Home care workers at risk for occupational injuries and sexual harassment. Having status and stature provides protection. There is a need for a group setting in which home care workers can share their experiences and receive support.

01:30:30: End of interview.